

Inspectors examine ship for clues to fire, explosion

MIAMI (AP) — Safety inspectors boarded the soot-stained Emerald Seas when the cruise ship returned to port Thursday following a fire and explosion that forced passengers to abandon ship temporarily.

Disembarking passengers said some people who were trapped below deck when the fire broke out Wednesday morning screamed for help in terror as passageways filled with black smoke.

Seventeen people were treated for smoke inhalation from the blaze that broke out in a storage locker and ignited a nearby oxygen tank as the ship sailed off Little Stirrup Cay in the Bahamas.

Coast Guard and National Transportation Safety Board inspectors examined the 623-foot ship cabin by cabin and interviewed passengers and crew.

The fire appeared to be an accident, said Coast Guard Capt. Curt Martin, captain of the Port of Miami. There were no signs that anything was stored improperly and the crew praised the crew's actions during the emergency, he said.

An assistant cook spotted the fire at 9:10 a.m., notified the bridge and began sealing watertight doors, Martin said. The Coast Guard was notified 30 minutes later.

Twenty shipboard firefighters extinguished the blaze in 20 minutes, finishing before Coast Guard rescue vessels arrived, said Bernard Chabot, president of Eastern Cruise Lines.

The 987 passengers were evacuated temporarily to Little Stirrup Cay, a privately owned, beach-lined strip where a band and free drinks awaited the ship's regular call.

Martin said the Emerald Seas' crew was working to prepare it for its scheduled cruise Friday, and that he would approve its departure if all safety equipment was ready. Twenty-six cabins suffered smoke damage, including four with partly destroyed bulkheads, said Chabot.

The passengers were in buoyant spirits as they disembarked Thursday, a day before their four-day Bahamian cruise was to have ended, and many praised the crew. Some, however, said there had been confusion and a delay in the call to evacuate after black smoke began filling the lower decks.

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